Who were the Sons of Liberty and what legacy did they leave behind? Now for the first time since 1795 the world can peer inside a time capsule created by Sons of Liberty Samuel Adams and Paul Revere. Visit www.history.com/timecapsule to view the related video.

**Terms To Define**

Below are some terms that will be useful for students to know before exploring the story of the Sons of Liberty time capsule.

- **Cornerstone**
- **Conservation**
- **Masonry**
- **Silversmith**
- **Shilling**
- **Currency**

**Short Timeline:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1795</strong></td>
<td>Time capsule buried under the cornerstone at the newly constructed Massachusetts State House in Boston by Sam Adams, Paul Revere and other leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>1855</strong></td>
<td>Time capsule discovered during construction at the State House; new items are added before it is placed in a brass box and reburied.</td>
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<td><strong>2014</strong></td>
<td>Time capsule rediscovered during a water infiltration project at the State House; items are being examined and conserved at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston before they are reburied.</td>
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Sons of Liberty Time Capsule:

In 2014 an engineering firm working on the State House located an intriguing brass box plastered into the cornerstone of the Massachusetts State House using ground penetrating radar. The box was meticulously removed by Pamela Hatchfield, head conservator for the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (www.mfa.org). Weeks later the box was opened in front of a live audience, with extreme care. The contents were mesmerizing.

The box contained layers of material. The original items, buried in 1795, had been rediscovered in 1855 at which time the items were cleaned and placed in the copper box, with new items added. This incredible finding gives us new insights into the nation’s founders and their legacy.

Who buried the time capsule in 1795 and why?

Governor Samuel Adams, Paul Revere, William Scollay and other Boston leaders presided over the laying of the cornerstone of the new Massachusetts State House in 1795, marking 20 years since the onset of the American Revolution. The construction of this building was a milestone for the United States and marked a significant success for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Designed by notable architect Charles Bulfinch and constructed by a master builder named Amos Lincoln, the State House was dedicated during a grand ceremony on July 4, 1795. Adams, Revere, Scollay and others had placed significant items into the cornerstone including a silver plate believed to have been inscribed by Revere and many coins including a 1652 “pine tree” shilling.

The cornerstone of the building was carried in a procession by fifteen white horses (the number of states in the Union at the time) through Boston, adorned with federal emblems, ribbons and other decorations, before arriving at the State House to be laid. The silver plate and coins were laid between two lead sheets. The ceremonial burial of items was a common practice among Freemasons. When the cornerstone was laid, fifteen guns were fired followed by remarks by Governor Adams and Paul Revere. The leaders were marking not only the new building, but the survival of the American government.
**Who were the freemasons?**

Freemasons were a society of men who made a commitment to civic responsibility and virtue. Masonic lodges were the gathering places of freemasons. Their organization was based on a medieval guild system in which outstanding members could be elevated to the highest position of Grand Master. At the time that the State House cornerstone was laid in 1795, Paul Revere had risen to the rank of Grand Master. At the dedication ceremony, he delivered an address dedicating the building and honoring Governor Sam Adams.

"They decided to construct a new box made of copper and tin for the artifacts, clean them, add a few new items, and relay them beneath the cornerstone."

**What happened when the time capsule was unearthed in 1855?**

During the 1850s the State House was undergoing construction when workers doing repairs were surprised to see copper coins and a small box held together by two lead sheets. The Board overseeing the construction project at the State House consulted experts on how to handle and conserve the items. They decided to construct a new box made of copper and tin for the artifacts, clean them, add a few new items, and relay them beneath the cornerstone. They also inscribed the back of the plate. They attempted to clean the items with a potassium-based salt mix called potash which did not work as planned, so they tried again with nitric acid and vitrol which were thought to be good preservation agents at the time. In a small ceremony presided over by Governor Henry Gardner on August 11, 1855, the box was returned below the cornerstone. They had added new silver and copper coins, the title page of the Massachusetts Colony Records which had just been printed, and several newspapers of the time, carefully folded.

*Special thanks to Michael Comeau, Executive Director of the Massachusetts Archives, Commonwealth Museum and State Records Center, for providing historical context.*
Breaking News:
What was in the Time Capsule?

In January 2015 the time capsule was opened during a press conference at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. MFA Conservator Pamela Hatchfield and Michael Comeau, the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Archives, carefully removed and revealed the contents of the time capsule.

The time capsule weighed 10 pounds and measured 5-1/2 x 7-1/2 x 1-1/2 inches.

It contained the following:

- Silver and copper coins — dating from 1652 to 1855. One of the coins was a 1652 Massachusetts Pine Tree Shilling, one of the earliest forms of currency in the American colonies.
- Silver plaque thought to be engraved by Paul Revere
- Copper medal depicting George Washington
- Newspapers
- Paper impression of the Seal of the Commonwealth
- Calling or business cards
- Title page from the Massachusetts Colony Records
A Closer Look: Let’s Examine the Time Capsule Contents

1795 Plaque: Dedication at the Massachusetts State House

This plaque, believed to be engraved by Paul Revere, reads:

This Corner-Stone intended for the use of the Legislature and Executive Branches of Government of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was laid by His Excellency Samuel Adams, Esquire Governor of said Commonwealth assisted by the Most Worshipful Paul Revere, Grand Master; and Right Worshipful William Scollay, Deputy Grand Master; The Grand Wardens and Brethren of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts on the 4th Day of July, on the 20th Anniversary of American Independence.

© Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think this plaque was created, and what occasion did it mark?

2. Why do you think Boston’s leaders marked the 20th anniversary of independence?

3. What is interesting about the date on the plaque? Would you expect a different date? Discuss.
**Massachusetts Pine Tree Shilling**

In the early days of the Massachusetts colony leaders realized they needed currency, yet all coins needed to be minted and approved by the King. This “Pine Tree Shilling” with the date 1652 is an example of one of the earliest forms of currency in the colonies. The pine tree was a major export during the 17th century, which could be the reason for the symbolism on the coin. Visit the [Smithsonian National Museum of American History](http://americanhistory.si.edu/) to learn more about these coins. (Search for “pine tree shilling” at [http://americanhistory.si.edu/](http://americanhistory.si.edu/) if you can’t access the hyperlink here.)

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Why do you think Sam Adams and the other leaders would have placed a pine tree shilling in the time capsule?

2. Why do you think it was important that the early colonies have their own currency?
On the day the cornerstone was laid at the State House, Paul Revere gave important remarks. Below is an excerpt from his speech:

Worshipful Brethren, I congratulate you on this auspicious day: — when the Arts and Sciences are establishing themselves in our happy Country, a Country distinguished from the rest of the World, by being a Government of Laws. — Where Liberty has found a Safe and Secure abode, — and where her Sons are determined to support and protect her.

Brethren, we are called this day by our Venerable + patriotic Governor, his Excellency Samuel Adams, to Assist him in laying the Corner Stone of a Building to be erected for the use of the Legislature and Executive branches of Government of this Commonwealth. May we my Brethren, so Square our Actions thro life as to shew to the World of Mankind, that we mean to live within the Compass of Good Citizens that we wish to Stand upon a Level with them that when we part we may be admitted into that Temple where Reigns Silence & peace.

— PAUL REVERE, JULY 4, 1775

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think a ceremony was held to dedicate the State House? What kinds of similar ceremonies are held in American society today?

2. Why do you think Paul Revere called the dedication ceremony at the State House an “auspicious day”? Why do you think this was an important milestone for the United States?

3. What do you think Revere means by the phrase “Compass of Good Citizens”?
**Who was Samuel Adams?**

Samuel Adams was an American revolutionary leader who helped forge the Patriot cause in Boston and became one of the nation’s most important leaders and statesmen. Born in 1722, Adams was a graduate of Harvard College who failed to find success as a newspaper publisher and brewer before devoting himself to the revolutionary movement in the 1760s and 1770s. Adams was a writer, strategist and a key leader of the Committee of Correspondence. He helped organize the resistance to the Tea Party in Boston which culminated in the historic Boston Tea Party. As a Massachusetts representative to the Continental Congress, Adams was a signer of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. After the revolution he served as Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts and then Governor from 1793 to 1797.

[Learn more about Samuel Adams](#)

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**Who was Paul Revere?**

Paul Revere was an American revolutionary who is best known for warning the Patriots, including John Hancock and Sam Adams, that British soldiers were headed to Lexington to arrest them. A member of Boston’s Committee of Safety, he went on his famous ride in April 1775. Revere was also a highly skilled silversmith who produced bowls, utensils, and other special pieces as well as many engravings including a well-known depiction of the Boston Massacre. After the revolution, in which he fought as an artillery soldier, Revere became the Grand Master of the Masonic Grand Lodge in Boston and held several other important roles such as organizing Boston’s first fire insurance company.

[Learn more about Paul Revere](#)

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**Research assignment:** Also listed on the 1795 plaque is William Scollay. Who was Scollay and why was he an important person in Boston at the time?
Extended Activities

1. **Time Capsule: Examined.** Students can further explore the items in the time capsule through online research. Visit the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston online and search for “time capsule” to get started: [http://www.mfa.org](http://www.mfa.org). Students can write short newspaper articles or essays about this finding. Why is the discovery of the time capsule important?

2. **Sons of Liberty.** Students can choose one leader of the American Revolutionary era including Paul Revere, Sam Adams, Ben Franklin, Dr. Joseph Warren and write a short essay about one of these leaders and their contribution to the revolutionary era.

3. **Time Capsule: Conserved.** The 1795 time capsule is being conserved before it is reburied. Do you think new items should be added to the time capsule before it is reburied? If not, why? If so, what do you think should be added and why?

4. **A New Generation’s Time Capsule.** If you were to create a time capsule what would you include and why? Ask students to create a list of items they would include in a time capsule with a short essay about why they would include these items. Students should also consider what kind of box or container they would place the items in, where they would bury the capsule, and how they would hope to preserve the items for the future.
What is Conservation?

Conservation encompasses actions taken toward the long-term preservation of cultural property. It includes:

- **Examination** - to determine the causes of deterioration
- **Documentation** - to record the condition before, during, and after treatment
- **Preventative Conservation** - actions taken to minimize further deterioration
- **Treatment** - to stabilize the condition of an artifact
- **Restoration** - to attempt to bring cultural property closer to its original appearance

Who is a Conservator?

Conservators are professionals who work to physically save our cultural property from the ravages of time, the threats of pollution, and the devastation brought on by natural disasters.

This information is courtesy of the American Institute for the Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. Learn more at [http://www.conservation-us.org/](http://www.conservation-us.org/)

Links:

Learn more about the era of the American Revolution at History.com:

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston:

Learn more about the Time Capsule discovery:

Massachusetts Archives:
[http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/](http://www.sec.state.ma.us/arc/)